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The Hon T. N. Talfourd
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SPEECH

Delivered in the House of Commons

ON WEDNESDAY, JUNE 3, 1841 ;

ON SIR ROBERT PEEL'S RESOLUTION

OF

WANT OF CONFIDENCE IN MINISTERS.

BY

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SPEECH.

MR. SPEAKER,

IF when the Right Hon. Baronet, the Member for Pembroke, closed his speech and the debate on Friday, I regarded with surprise the indications of the spirit which inspired it, I own that it appears yet more remarkable when surveyed in the cool light of reflection. From the first sentence, in which he offered his ironical congratulations to the Noble Secretary for Ireland on the “complacent tone in which he had spoken of the acts of a Government in its last extremity”—as if even the satisfaction of a moment were an intolerable offence—through all its varieties of invective, down to its close, where piety came to the aid of failing language, and he blessed God for the approaching downfall of his sometime comrades, it presents a specimen of curious animosity, which I believe is without example, and I hope will be without copy in the annals of political warfare. Fortunately for those who are the objects of such attacks, there is a tendency in all violent emotions to overleap their objects—the certainty of the aim is not in proportion to the eagerness of the marksman; and the spring which is animated by the most fiery venom sometimes carries the deadly stroke beyond its intended victim. Such I hope to show is the result of the attack which the once Lord of the Admiralty has made on those who shared with him in the excitements, in the dangers, in the agitations, and in the triumphs, of far more critical times than those which now

await us. The substance of his charge—amidst the imagery of desperate pirates, of incendiary tenants, and of burning brands—is, that the Ministers have carried the principal measures in which they have succeeded, by the concurrence of their political opponents, and that they have failed to carry other measures when they have wanted that aid. To obtain “ample room and verge enough” to trace the characters in which he would write his accusations of successes obtained by too great concurrence of opinion, and failures not produced by want of merit, but by deficiency of strength, the Right Hon. Baronet complains, that the Noble Secretary for Ireland has sought to limit the question to the exposition of the Budget, and has claimed to himself the right of finding matter for his changes in former years. I will not deny that right; but I, in my turn, must request the Right Hon. Baronet to carry his retrospective review a little further, and take one glance at earlier days, when he shared in struggles which he has not forgotten, because assuredly he has not forgiven. Many of the Hon. Members who now encircle him may be justified in looking back, with a fond regret, at those buttresses of Ministerial strength which were destroyed in 1832; may yet entertain some busy, though indistinct hope, that the seasons of Tory domination, which they so long sustained, may return; may regard those as the palmy days of administrations, when taxation, coercion, and war, were extended by mighty majorities—when paper credit was maintained by frequent and bloody execution—when the sanctities of private life were beset by spies and violated by domestic treason—and when the expression of public opinion only gave to the Government a sterner aspect; impelled it to new severities; and excused it in fresh inroads on the remains of freedom. But the Right Hon. Baronet can scarcely believe this grim front of authority to have been desirable then, or to be possible now;—he was associated with those followers of Mr. Fox, whose name he has ventured to introduce, and

who, I think, would look with astonishment on the position in which he stands, and, though in his benignity he would not call him “a recreant Whig,” would regard him with sorrow rather than anger. In that school, where the hopes of humanity were entrusted to small minorities, he might have learned to feel that might is not always right; that truth is not always with numbers; and that the wisdom of true statesmanship may be embodied in efforts which only generations unborn shall fully recognise! When the tremendous force of public opinion broke down those awful barriers—when the agitation in which the then Lord of the Admiralty was a leader was triumphant—when the pillared rottenness of ancient corruption lay prostrate before him and his colleagues—the great practical question arose, whether the renovated and purified Constitution should be administered by those who had struggled in that work of majestic regeneration, or by those who had opposed it—by those whose fondest hopes attended its prosperity, or those whose honest fears still prophesied its ruin. Happily, as I think, the authors of the Reform Bill became its guardians; but it was no easy task for those who, resting from organic change, desired fairly to apply and liberally to construe its blessings, to maintain, in the calm of victory, the position they had acquired during the passion of the struggle. Not to dwell on the absence of those palpable appliances which their success had deprived all Governments for all time—which has been repeatedly adverted to in this debate, and is too obvious to be dwelt on—they stood in a glorious but anxious position, between their discomfited opponents and their too sanguine allies. They found themselves, then, on the table-land they had achieved—desirous of consolidating and sustaining the advantages they had gained, but contented there—between two parties, one of whom hated their success, while the other was jealous of their pause;—and could they expect that, in the maintenance of the fruits of their victory, they should either succeed to the majorities of their

predecessors, or maintain that impulse which had been great in action? In this position they have felt that the elements of power itself were changed—that it must seek new sources of strength from a wider sphere—and finding those elements not in one party but in each, they must avail themselves of them in support of the measures which not one party alone would support, but to which each might by turns contribute its honest sanction. If this appeal for support, not to persons alone but also to principles, is dishonourable, it follows that the powers of the state can never be justly administered except by an extreme party; and the Right Hon. Member for Tamworth will find as little consolation in that doctrine as the Ministers whom he now seeks to displace. Between the claims of Chartism on the one hand, and those of the Toryism of deepest Orange hue on the other, are immoveable gradations: and the Ministry which now would take any course but the wildest, must often appeal to elements to be found in those who differ in some points with themselves. If, indeed, the view which the Right Hon. Baronet, the Member for Pembroke, seems to adopt of a statesman's duties be just—if the simile in which, among the toys and fantasies of his passion, he likens the position of adverse parties to gamblers, where one party may shuffle, and cut, and deal, and the other hide their cards, justly explains it—if the game of politics is animated by no nobler inspiration than personal spite, and addressed to no greater rewards than the emoluments of office—if principles are only the counters with which the gamesters play; then it is correct to assume that these principles are property for the purpose of the ignoble contest; that all Conservatism belongs to one side of the table, and all Progression to the other. But if Statesmanship is a nobler game, I see no just cause of complaint against the Minister who introduces measures, which he knows that even his opponents will recognise as just and wise, and who relies on their honesty to support him. The Hon. Baronet may call this

weakness—I call it wisdom. His party feeling may be so intense, that he may think it objection enough to any measure, that it will be cursed with the approval of his opponents; but in this his feeling cannot be shared by the Right Hon. Baronet, the Member for Tamworth. Yet even he has taunted the Ministers with the support he gave them on the Privilege question, and on the Chartist petition of the other night, as if they had not a right to expect his support on those questions—as if he could have done otherwise than support them without forfeiting his high character, even in his own esteem; and, in truth, his ground of want of confidence, because his support has been required and given, amounts to this complaint, that on many occasions they have agreed with him. If he should succeed to office, let him be assured he will very soon require—and I trust he will receive—when he seeks to restrain his Orange allies, or his Chartist opponents—the same support which he has so frankly given to the Ministers; and of which, I trust, they will not so often remind him. I, therefore, translate the censure—that the Ministers have passed no great measure without the support of their political opponents—to mean no other than that their great measures have been such as to secure the approval of the wisest and the best, and that some of them are so good, that even the Right Hon. Baronet, the Member for Pembroke, claims them for his own! But the Right Hon. Baronet further accuses Ministers, that, besides committing the crime of passing measures so good that even *he* concurs in their adoption, they have proposed others which he and his friends have opposed, and which thus opposed the Ministry have been unable to carry; and he first instances the attempt to settle the question of Church Rates. Now, if the old lesson is to be read backwards—if to command success is nobler than to deserve it—I grant they are liable to the Right Hon. Baronet's censure. But their position, in relation to this question, is precisely that which I would instance as exemplifying the

difficulties of a Ministry, who, anxious to preserve the principle on which the noblest institutions of the country rest, are yet desirous of preventing that principle from being exercised to the vexation of those who conscientiously differ from its application. If they had been studious only of acquiring popularity from the great body of Dissenters who take an interest in political affairs, they would have adopted their doctrine—that those who do not desire to attend the services of the Church, ought to be exempted from the duty of contributing to the repairs of its fabrics—but they have not done so; they have attempted to reconcile the great doctrine, that the first and most sacred duty of the state is to provide for the religious instruction of all her people, with the removal of those obstacles which render the execution of the laws always vexatious, often difficult, sometimes impossible. Believing that the Church of England exists, not only for the blessing of those who resort to her services, but of all who desire to see religion and piety established on sure foundations: admitting that her fabrics scattered through the land do not, as they point to heaven “with silent finger,” bear with them only the aspirations of those who worship within them, but of all those whose thoughts rise from earth heavenwards: admitting that it is just that a national charge should arise out of a national duty, I yet think that the effort to extend her foundations by a wider charity, was worthy of those, who, by the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, had admitted the Protestant Dissenters to civil rights. True, it has failed; but, strange as it may seem to the Right Hon. Baronet, I believe that one generous attempt to break down the bonds which sever the brotherhood of mankind—nay, one earnest hope for the perfect union of those who are “made of one blood”—is better—is nobler—is more efficacious—and exerts a wider influence, even its failure, than the most energetic expressions of hatred, or the most vigorous acts of coercion. The Right Hon. Baronet, the Member for Pembroke, having taken

occasion to taunt the Right Hon. President of the Board of Control, with an imaginary failure at the hustings at Nottingham—forbearance from which he might have learned in his own journey from Cumberland to Pembroke—with a courage which I cannot sufficiently admire, adverted to a subject which the Member for Tamworth with wiser caution omitted—and breathed that name of “*Ireland*,” which if whispered in the ear of his illustrious leader, when he shall ascend the triumphal chariot of administration amidst the cheers of his friends, shall send such chilliness to his hopes as the warnings of mortality, by the monitory slave, shed into the soul of the Roman Conqueror. He taunted us with the failure of our efforts to do justice to Ireland. I admit we have failed—not in applying such consolation to that afflicted country as our adversaries have permitted us to employ—not in our endeavour to curb the pride of her oppressors; to administer the laws with equal justice; to make emancipation a living truth instead of an empty boast; but we have failed in our hope to give to her that just equality of political rights with ours, which nature entitles her to claim, and both charity and wisdom enjoin us to yield.

But which think you will she prefer? The vain hope, the futile wish, and unsuccessful struggle to save her, or the power that shall crush her affections and turn her hopes into despair? Ireland is ready with her answer! Ages of oppression have quickened her sensibilities, and she hails the expression of kindness as an unwonted, but most welcome, boon. Next, the Right Hon. Baronet refers to the Poor Law Amendment Bill, which to me, if not the unkindest, is the most astonishing cut of all. Here is an Act which he himself has assisted to introduce; which he has seen renewed from the pressure of these party debates without objection; which, as far as I know, he has never assisted to improve; and which he seizes with eager hand to hurl against those who have been associated with

his noblest friends in sustaining it against long popular censure. Why? O, it is too fearful a weapon—it is envenomed too deeply with the hatred of class against class to be rejected at such a season. And on what right does he who helped to fashion now claim thus to use it? He says it does not contain suggested ameliorations—has he sought to apply them? He complains especially that it does not provide for the medical relief of the sick, or prohibit the odious system of advertisements for tender. Where is the clause placed or the votes to be moved by him to remedy this evil? The Government have considered it—they have not decided upon it—clauses have been framed to meet it after great care and consideration. I have placed them on the votes, and they would have been debated but for those party strifes which seem inevitable while the balance of parties is so equally poised in this House. For three years I have been in correspondence with the Provincial Medical Association on this subject: and, strange to say, I was never made aware till Friday that our cause had so distinguished a well-wisher as the Right Hon. Baronet. I know not whether the Member for Finsbury, who is connected with the other great organ of the medical body, the London Medical Association, has been more fortunate; but I rather think that he is equally surprised with me at the hidden virtue which the warmth of the debate has quickened into life. Good things as well as evil may thus be developed:—"it is the bright day which brings forth the adder;" and on the other hand, it is the enthusiasm of a feeling which is not love which has prompted into day our unknown and hitherto unsuspected friend. For one measure the Hon. Baronet does give us credit; he says, "The Post-office is all your own"—and wishes us joy of the issue. Yes, Sir, the Post-office is ours; and even the wish of the Right Hon. Gentleman cannot impair the gift or arrest the blessing! It has been ours to take off a tax on the affections—it has been ours to give to the poor the benefit of those powers which annihilate space and time: it has been ours to give freedom to the intercourse of mind

with mind, of heart with heart; and the people will not reject the boon even though the Right Hon. Baronet blesses it. One other measure, too, is ours, in which I do not think he can claim a share—one great moral reform, which, emanating from the legal profession, has shed its blessings among the wretched throughout the land—the Abolition of Imprisonment for Debt on Mesne Process. For this great and good work we are mainly indebted to the comprehensive sagacity and the unwearied zeal of the Attorney-General; and whether he shall sooner or later retire from the laborious, the painful, the invidious duties which he has discharged for a longer period than any of his predecessors throughout English history, he will carry with him not only the recollection of those years of strenuous industry which he has devoted to the public service—not only the consciousness which he shares with his illustrious predecessors, Lord Abinger and Lord Lyndhurst, of having sparingly and gently wielded the powers of the Crown in their relations to the Press—not only the great testimony borne to the judgment and the wisdom of those painful proceedings which he directed when the country's peace was lately endangered by misguided men, in the verdicts of juries, and in the tranquillity which has followed them; but he will retain the enduring satisfaction that he has left the law, in a most important point, better than he found it—that he has narrowed the limits within which misfortune is confounded with crime—that he has annihilated a thousand petty oppressions at a stroke, and with them a thousand practices in which cunning preyed upon distress, and debased at once the practitioner and the sufferer—that he has deserved the thanks of the mercantile interest for additional security, and “the blessings of those who are ready to perish.” And if from the reform, I may turn for a moment to the administration of the law, I have a right to claim for those who have performed the most delicate and painful duties of the Executive Government—the supervision of criminal sentences, those first

duties of a Ministry—a degree of care and attention, a firmness when firmness was needed, a wise and humane discrimination in all, to which their opponents have often borne testimony, and which their opponents, I believe, will emulate, but which they can never surpass.

Sir, the Right Hon. Baronet, in approaching the financial scheme of the Government, which has directly induced the present attempt to visit them with Parliamentary censure, has wholly omitted to say a word on its essential merits; whether, therefore, he wishes us to regard his opinions on what he calls “the maddening question of the Corn-laws” as those which he has advocated in an elaborate pamphlet, and enforced in former speeches—or whether he has renounced his principles, now that they are adopted by his early friends, and is now prepared to defend the Sliding Duty as essential to the prosperity of agriculture, we must wait to learn another day. I will not, therefore, fatigue the House by attempting to discuss their merits now, further than to complain of the injustice which, I think, has been done to that scheme, not only by the Right Hon. Member for Pembroke, but by others who have considered only its abstract merits, and have compared it with nothing. I know they insist on the right to conceal their cards—they have a right to do as gamblers, who, when the cards are dealt and honours are divided, look for nothing but the odd trick; but have they a right to do so, or rather are they right in doing so, as statesmen, candidates for the confidence of the House of Commons, and for the Administration of an empire? A great exigency has arrived—how created is immaterial to the question of the remedy;—but, if I must answer, I will say, by the acts of those who, during long years of misrule, mortgaged the industry of this country for ages yet unborn, in the vain attempt to extinguish liberty throughout the world. But the true wisdom is to look, not to the past, but to the future; the statesman who would govern must legislate for that future. Something must be done; for I can scarcely think the Right Hon. Member for

the University of Cambridge can have been rightly understood, when he was thought to propose to equalise our income with our expense, by letting things alone,—in which he would resemble that ingenious gentleman, Sir Abel Handy, in the play, who, when his house is in flames, and none of his various inventions are at hand to quench it, triumphantly exclaims to his son,—“I have hit it, Bob! Perhaps it may go out of itself!” Now, it may be that the scheme proposed for meeting the deficiency, not by increasing, but by lightening the burdens of the people, is in itself an evil—still it may be a less evil than the deficiency it proposes to remedy, and a less evil than the substitute which will be applied. Can we judge, in ignorance of what that substitute is? Are we prepared to affirm this Bill of Indictment in the dark? On all other great questions the principles and purposes of public men stand open to the day; why are the financial questions, now the most urgent of all, to be exceptions to this rule? Above all, how,—when the objection rather relates to the time when the scheme is propounded, than to its essential merits,—can we judge of the exigency, of the urgency of the call, unless we knew what other resources may be in store? But the Right Hon. Baronet, the Member for Pembroke, says, that great excitement prevails on one of the questions involved in the scheme—in which, by the way, he differs from some of the ablest organs of his party, who assure us there is no excitement at all worth mentioning, and that the attempt to raise it has been a signal failure—and, quoting the expression of Mr. Tierney, “that the malice of the Devil himself could not have thought of preparing for a dissolution with the false cry of the Church in danger,” still would impute this malice of the Devil to those whom he charges with raising the cry of cheap bread. Now I will not discuss the malice of the Devil with the Right Hon. Baronet—I will make no invidious comparisons—I will do injustice to no one, present or absent; but I will fearlessly assert that there is nothing more malicious or

more devilish in the cry of cheap bread than in the cry of No Popery, or in that which the Hon. Baronet seems about to echo of No Poor Law ! I can scarcely tell what he desires when he speaks of excitement and dissolution ; at one time he says, “ Do not emulate the malice of the Devil by preparing for dissolution during excitement,” and the next moment, he says, “ Dissolve instantly !” Is it that his eagerness gets the better of his judgment—that he is so tremulously anxious to realise his triumph in the downfall of his friends, that he grudges the least delay, and thus he is led into these inconsistent wishes ? But how idle it is to admit the justice, nay the necessity, of an appeal to the people, and then complain that excitement prevails through the land ! Why, such an appeal without excitement is almost a contradiction in terms. The appeal to a great people cannot be pronounced or answered in whispers. It must rouse—it must excite—it must awaken—it must rapidly present those vivid truths which it seeks to attest—it must call to its aid, not only the result of long studies and examinations, but the wants, the feelings, the affections of a great people. The Government will make the appeal, and will seek the solution of the true constitutional doctrine—not whether they have the confidence of Parliament, but the confidence of those who create it.

I now approach to the close of the Right Hon. Baronet’s speech, and with it the termination of this trespass on the patience of the House. I leave him in the undisturbed possession of his comparison of the Ministers to tenants, who, under notice to quit, in vengeance set fire to the property of the landlord ; and to pirates who rush with torches to the magazine ;—but when he brandishes that flaring simile of the enemy of the Philistines, who sent three hundred foxes with firebrands among his foes, I must take leave to restore that comparison to its original occasion, and to its rightful owner, and leave the Right Hon. Baronet nothing but the boldness with which he has seized it, and the charity and the grace with which it was applied. It was

used, indeed, against another Government on a parallel occasion—on a charge precisely similar; one of its objects was the Right Honourable Baronet, the Member for Pembroke; the speaker who applied it was the Right Honourable Baronet, the Member for Tamworth, who now sits beside him. On the 3d of March 1831, Sir Robert Peel, addressing the Treasury Bench, where the Right Hon. Baronet, the Member for Pembroke, then sat beside some of the Ministers whom he now assails, thus concluded one of his greatest speeches:—"It is the duty of a Government to calm, not to stimulate, the fever of popular excitement. They have adopted a different course; they have sent through the land the firebrand of agitation, and no one can now recall it. But let us hope there may be limits to their powers of mischief. They have, *like the giant enemy of the Philistines, lighted three hundred brands and scattered through the country discord and dismay*; but God forbid that they should, like him, have the power to concentrate in death all the energies which belong to life, and to signalise their own destruction by bowing to the earth the pillars of that sacred edifice which contains within its walls, according to their own admission, the noblest society of freemen in the world!" Thus has the Right Hon. Baronet, in generous oblivion of the past assault, seized the extinguished torch which once flashed before him, and relumined it with other light than that of genius, to brandish before those who with him endured its ancient fire. But I would turn for a moment to the true author of this splendid passage, and ask him whether the apprehensions which were then so honestly conceived, and so nobly expressed, have not proved to be visionary fears? The threatened administration did not expire—they appealed in the equipoise of the parties to the people—the people answered to the call—the majority of *one* became *one hundred and thirty-six*, and the second Charter of our Liberties became the law of the land. And are not those pillars, to which eloquent reference was made, as majestic and as stable as ever? Can the Right Hon.

Baronet look at the great body of gentlemen who now encircle him returned to a Parliament under that law—to the state of Municipal Corporations—nay, even to the very vote which he hopes to carry in a reformed House of Commons, and not admit that these fears were vain? And why? Because the true Conservatism of England is not merely that which arrays itself under the banner of one party, however mighty—it is sheltered in the million homes of England—it is blended with all the “high endeavours” which are open to all, and the security of the “glad success” when obtained; it is associated with the piety, not of churchmen only, but of all; it is cherished by the consciousness which the humblest, as knowledge expands his vision, may enjoy, that he is a sharer in the triumphs of Humanity and Freedom throughout the world; and therefore, it is safe amidst the crash of parties and the change of laws. What may be the issue of this motion, or what the issue of that greater appeal which it is believed awaits us, I will not pretend to conjecture; but of this I feel assured, that when those heats inseparable from the present state of parties shall have subsided, and we have passed away from this busy scene; when even the resentments of the Right Hon. Baronet themselves shall at last be still; that those who shall look with undazzled gaze on the events of these stirring times, will recognise among the men who have been now charged with weakness, a strength not born amidst great majorities nor dependent on them; a strength, not of the giant but of the enchanter; a strength, not composed of confederated monopolies; not cemented by borrowed hypocrisies; not envenomed by the poison extracted from old and blighted regards; but born of good hopes for man amidst glooms; matured by the just blending of the elements of conservatism and progression; which no temporary failure can destroy; for it chose the happiness and freedom of a world for its aim, and posterity for its arbiters!









